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### Vocal Techniques

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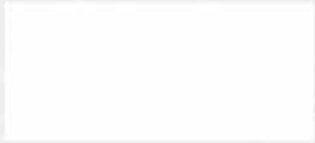
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#### Recommended Citation

Murdoch, Ginger, "Vocal Techniques" (1969). *Honors Theses*. 412.

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*Vocal music*

VOCAL TECHNIQUES

by  
Ginger Murdoch

Honors Special Studies

January 1969

#158

## INTRODUCTION

After studying voice for two years, I have found this general study of vocal techniques to be **very educational as well as interesting**. When I began the study I was classified as a mezzo-soprano, due to a limited range. Therefore, I was interested mainly in material dealing with the mezzo-soprano voice. During the year, however, my range has increased and, because of the quality of my voice added to this increase in range, I am now beginning to sing more lyric soprano music. Naturally, then, my interest has shifted to the lyric soprano voice, its qualities, tessitura, etc.

I believe, however, that the thing which has impressed me most in the whole study is the amount of time which must be spent to become a truly great artist. The great singers never complete their studies. So many young musicians today lack the time and patience one must have to attain this artistry.

"To be a singer in the true sense, everything must be sacrificed to it, and it requires the whole life, first properly to train the voice, and then properly to preserve it."

Richard Strauss once remarked while rehearsing an opera:  
"The human voice is the most beautiful instrument of all. But  
it is also the most difficult to play."

Singing, viewed as a technical performance, is easy to do  
and hard to learn. No physical expression can be easier than  
singing when once the singer has mastered the method. But  
because it is difficult to acquire the necessary automatic  
operation of the vocal organs, the study of singing needs a long  
time.

Too many ambitious young singers often make the grave error  
of thinking that singing is voice and nothing else. However,  
some of the greatest singers in the history of opera were not  
gifted with extraordinary voices. But their great technical  
skills enabled them to become true masters of this art.

The truly great singers never complete their studies.  
Before they began their careers, they studied singing for years.  
But today too many singers lack the patience needed to make a  
truly great artist. For voice is one thing and art is another,  
and centuries ago Horace remarked that art is long and life is  
short.

The early Italian teachers required their students to  
devote themselves for several years to vocalises. They did not  
permit the student to begin work on operatic arias till they  
were properly prepared to do so. Everyone was a master of

passage work. The vocal study of the time gave the student not only a clear, limpid tone and a perfect legato, but a matchless flexibility.<sup>1</sup>

Olive Fremstad is one of the world's great opera singers. In giving advice to young singers she states, "What one has, that which is inborn, which impels one to a certain course in life, is the best of all guides for determining one's career. In the instance of a girl with a naturally small voice, who can tell what that voice will be after ten years of training and development by practical experience? Every step of study should aid toward that ultimate development; every role learned should bring a fuller elasticity and breadth upon which to build for greater things. Time, work, and experience, and only these, will show what she can do. Behind it all is the degree of individual intelligence, which is a vital and deciding factor, and forcefully capable of its share in the general evolution. It takes more than voice to succeed; there must also be intelligence, musical ability, bodily development, and soul development, as well as voice to make an artist."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Key, Pierre Key's Music Year Book, 1925-26 (New York: Pierre Key, Inc., 1926), pp.26-27.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Elson, University Musical Encyclopedia, Musicians' Practical Instructor, Vol.II, (New York: Aberdale Press, 1963), p. 523-25.

## Some Principles of Singing

In the University Musical Encyclopedia, Arthur Elson sums up the techniques of singing as follows:

1. To sing without effort.
2. To sing accurately.
3. To sing without fatigue for a reasonable length of time.

A singer must breathe easily and naturally. The muscles must remain relaxed so that the air can be inhaled smoothly and easily. Though little air is needed for even the longest phrase, breathing exercises must be performed before the technique can be acquired. Deep breathing should be practiced calmly and slowly. Holding one's breath to stretch the muscles is directly harmful to the vesicles of the lungs.

Correct intonation depends upon tensing the right muscles, and only them. Nasal exercises demand complete relaxation of the muscles. They may sound unpleasant, but they are vital if the voice is to carry.

In their effort to develop a powerful voice many singers are tempted to overdo the breathing exercises or to force the loud notes. Soft notes carry well and require practically no breathing; nevertheless, they demand just as careful training as loud notes.

Pure notes are not enough; a singer must also be able to enunciate the words of the song distinctly. Singing is primarily the production of vowel sounds, and since very little change in positioning the tongue and lips is required to alter a vowel

sound, much practice is needed in the production of pure vowels. The tongue should lie flat and relaxed in the lower jaw, with the tip against the front teeth; if enunciation necessitates use of the tongue, only the tip should be used.<sup>3</sup>

William Shakespeare, the noted teacher of singing, gives us this definition of singing: "Singing is a perfect prolonged talking on a tune often much higher than speaking."

Breathing technique, resonance, and clear enunciation are the same in singing as in ordinary speech. In speech the use of the voice comes naturally; no one thinks about how the breathing is being controlled or the sound being produced. Correct singing should be equally easy and natural.<sup>4</sup>

#### Voice Classification

Voices should be classified primarily by natural timbre or quality and not by extent of range. In his book, Expressive Singing, Van A. Christy says, "Vocal quality within the easiest produced middle octave of the particular voice is the safest determinant; range alone is deceptive and never should be used as the basis for classification." Madame Marchesi states, "When in doubt, let quality be the deciding factor. Range is secondary." Grace says, "Compass is variable whereas color is

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<sup>3</sup>The World of Music, Vol. IV, (New York: Abradale Press, 1963), p. 1274-75.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.1275.

a more or less stable characteristic."

Albert B. Bach, in "Musical Education and Vocal Culture," enumerates twelve different kinds of voice, with compass and suitable roles, as given below. Giving only the women's voices, they are:

1. Contralto -- from small F to 2-lined E, as Arsace in Rossini's "Semiramide."
2. Mezzo-contralto -- from small G to 2-lined G, as Romeo in Bellini's "Montecchi e Capuletti."
3. Mezzo-soprano -- from small B-flat to 2-lined G or A, as Amneris in Verdi's "Aida."
4. Soprano sfogato (dramatic) -- from 1-lined C to 3-lined C, as Valentina in Meyerbier's "Huguenots."
5. Soprano d'agilita (coloratur) -- from 1-lined E to 3-lined E or F, as Amina in Bellini's "La Sonnambula."

Some place lyric soprano between dramatic soprano and coloratura soprano. The lyric soprano has about the same range as the dramatic soprano, but the lyric soprano voice is of a lighter quality and has good cantabile style.<sup>5</sup>

The mezzo-soprano voice combines some of the rich quality of the true contralto with the bright ring of the true soprano, and with a compass generally of about two octaves, from A to A". The tessitura lies in a most effective register between those of the contralto and the soprano, and the voice in consequence is greatly used for music of a dramatic character.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Elson, op. cit., p. 572.

<sup>6</sup>Eric Blom, Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Vol. III, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1959), p. 737.



It is also perhaps the most intimate and sympathetic voice for the performance of songs.

Robert Franz was a German organist, conductor, and composer who lived and wrote in the 19th century. In establishing the value of Franz as a song-writer it is essential to consider the limitations which he prescribed for himself. He excluded all that was passionate or extreme in feeling. "The ethical side in my songs," he said, "is the chief thing. They shall bring peace and reconciliation." Realism of any kind was equally abhorrent to him. "Beauty is truth, but a thing is not beautiful because it is true." Even the dramatic element is ruled out. It brought him too close to the disturbing aspects of life, from which he strove to provide shelter in an ideal and tranquil world of beauty created by his art. No dramatic ballad appears among his songs. More curious is the limitation to a single kind of voice, the mezzo-soprano. It is characteristic of the reserve in his nature that he rarely allows even this voice to exhibit its full range or power.<sup>7</sup>

To be a singer in the true sense, everything must be sacrificed to it, and it requires the whole life, first properly to train the voice, and then properly to preserve it.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., Vol. III, p. 456.

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